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Letter dated 27 July 2006 from the Permanent Representative of Armenia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I am writing in response to the letter dated 28 June 2006 from the Permanent Representative of Azerbaijan to the United Nations regarding the fires in the areas close to the line of contact (LOC) in Nagorno Karabagh circulated as a document of the General Assembly and the Security Council (A/60/911-S/2006/450).

The letter continues the Azerbaijani Government's policy of spreading distorted and groundless accusations against my country, despite countless and continuous registration of the facts proving the opposite. The latest attempt to create an "emergency situation" out of a usual natural phenomenon of grass fires occurring yearly in the region in the hottest period of the summer, both on the Nagorno Karabagh (NK) side and on the Azerbaijani side, has once again been proven unfounded by the monitoring team of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The inflated effort to blame the Republic of Armenia for the so-called "massive fires taking place in the eastern part of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, particularly in the eastern part of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, particularly in the mountainous and plain terrain used for agricultural and living purposes" which "will have disastrous consequences for the entire ecological system" of the region, as the situation is qualified in the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry statement of 19 June 2006, was clearly refuted in the report provided by the monitoring team (see annex).

It should be noted that on many previous occasions the authorities of the Nagorno Karabagh Republic had extended an invitation to the OSCE Chairman-in-Office requesting dispatch of a monitoring team to assess the situation on the ground. As the report of the OSCE monitoring team unequivocally states, "fires are a usual phenomenon in the region at this time of year, although the intense heat which began in early June 2006 does not normally appear until July. Because of the heat and strong winds in the area, the spread of fires was significantly greater than in recent years ... In the affected areas, including ruined villages on the NK side close to the LOC and the outskirts of Agdam, the fires had clearly burned away the

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short dry grass and had reached only the lower parts of the scarce bushes (mainly pomegranate) and some trees".

The findings of the monitoring team prove false any allegations of "terrain used for agricultural and living purposes" being affected by grass fires on the Nagorno Karabagh side. It affirms: "As stated in the report of the 'OSCE Fact-Finding Mission to the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh', the villages in this area are 'in complete ruins' and 'appear to be totally destroyed' (*AM: as a result of the war in 1992-1994*). What still remains was not visibly damaged as a result of fire. These areas were completely uninhabited ... To the rear of these areas (*AM: i.e. areas affected by the fire*) much of the land is cultivated and, in parts, the fires had burnt out naturally or were extinguished before reaching them."

The Azerbaijani side has gone so far as to suggest deliberate action with regard to the fires in the area close to the NK LOC on behalf of the Republic of Armenia. Firstly, it should be recalled here that the territories under discussion, which are totally unpopulated, are under full control of the duly elected authorities of the Nagorno Karabagh Republic. Secondly, as the report mentions, "The local commanders on the NK side stated that servicemen and civilians were doing their best to put out the fires. They complained that crops and cattle were at risk from the fires, as well as soldiers serving in the trenches. According to them it made no sense for the NK side to start fires so close to the front lines, for safety reasons. The fires could destroy mines which were there as defensive measures and which were difficult, dangerous and costly to replace". The report adds: "The roads and firebreaks cut into the grass had acted as barriers to prevent the fires spreading ... The fires had affected the NK side of the LOC in the northern areas ... Conversely, in the more southern areas, ... the land on the Azerbaijani side of the LOC had been more affected, with minimal damage on the NK side of the LOC."

The Nagorno Karabagh Armenian side, realizing its responsibility first of all for its own security, has done its best to put down the fires. Yet whose responsibility is the suppression of fires on the Azerbaijani side which the latter conveniently keeps silence about?

It is regrettable that the authorities of Azerbaijan continue the practice of disseminating distorted and even fabricated information with the sole aim of misleading the international community such as the United Nations, OSCE, the Council of Europe and the Organization of the Islamic Conference in its propaganda efforts. By lashing out allegations against Armenia on totally unrelated and unfounded issues, especially at a time of intensive negotiations between the parties to the conflict, it attempts to divert the international community's attention from its unwillingness and non-readiness to seriously negotiate a durable solution to the NK conflict that would guarantee the self-determination of its people and bring peace and security to the region.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 40, and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Armen **Martirosyan**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex to the letter dated 27 July 2006 from the Permanent Representative of Armenia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

The Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on the Conflict Dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Conference

REPORT ON FIRES AFFECTING AREAS CLOSE TO THE LOC

Tbilisi 10 July 2006

Introduction

On 22 June, at the Permanent Council in Vienna, the Azerbaijani delegation to the OSCE reported on fires affecting areas close to the Line of Contact (LOC), stating that it is necessary for the OSCE to assess the situation. The delegation distributed a compilation of satellite photographs of the affected areas around the Agdam and Martuni/Khojavend regions. At this point the PR and one member of his Office postponed their leave in order to travel to the area as soon as possible, with one Team assessing the Azerbaijani side of the LOC and the other the NK side.

On 23 June the Office submitted a note verbale to the Azerbaijani MFA and a similar request was forwarded to the NK authorities requesting Monitorings on 3-5 July, allowing the necessary time for the sides to put in place the usual security and safety measures for access to the areas close to the LOC. On 27 June a letter was forwarded to the CiO, Minister De Gucht, from the Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan officially requesting the PR CiO to investigate the situation regarding the fires. The NK authorities also sent a similar request to the Office of the PR CiO.

As the Office was requested to assess the situation as a matter of urgency, it was not possible to invite any experts to join the Teams.

The satellite photographs presented by the Azerbaijani authorities served as a very useful point of reference in identifying the affected areas.

The Monitorings, which facilitated the Teams' access to those areas close to the LOC where the fires had been, were conducted in the Agdam and Martuni/Khojavend regions on 3 and 4 July. A shot was fired on the final Observation site of the Monitoring on 4 July and as a result of the lack of adequate security measures, the PR CiO decided to cancel the last Monitoring scheduled for 5 July. The assessment was then made at a safe distance from the LOC. Despite these setbacks, the Monitoring Teams were able to cover, for the most part, the areas affected by fire. At the end of Day 1 on part of the Azerbaijani side of the LOC and throughout the area on Day 2, there were heavy rains, decreasing the chances of further fires.

Routing and Observations

Day 1

The Monitoring on Day 1 covered the areas close to the LOC to the east of Agdam, specifically in the areas of Kiyasli, Kengerli, Etemezli, Novruzlu, Marzili, Yusifjanly, Mekhrizli and Evoglu.

Team 1 (NK side)

The Team left Stepanakert/Khankendi and drove towards Agdam. On the outskirts of Stepanakert/Khankendi, an area of approximately one hectare where the grass had burnt away was visible from the road. The Team drove through Agdam, the eastern outskirts of which had also been affected by grass fires, over a relatively wide area, but confined to grass.

From Agdam the Team headed north-east on the main road from Etemezli in the direction of Bash Karvend for approximately 8 kilometres. On this road, 1.5-2 km north of Kengerli, the Team stopped to view a field of burnt grass, approximately 3 hectares, immediately to the west of the road. A firebreak had been cut through the grass to prevent the fire spreading. Also visible west of the road was smoke from a fire in the vicinity of Mekhrizli on the Azerbaijani side of the LOC. The Team then travelled through the villages of Etemezli and Kengerli, where

there were areas of burnt grass. The fire had spread over a wide area, and it was clear where roads and other barriers had acted as firebreaks.

At the first Monitoring site north-east of Sarydjarly, in the no-man's land between the NK and Azerbaijani positions, a fire had burned away the grass. Local commanders stated that the fire had reached their positions, and signalled damage in the trenches and fortifications. According to them the fires had burned 5-10 June and 15-20 June, and mines had exploded also during these periods as a result.

From this site, the Team moved south-west on the road past Sarydjarly, continuing south towards the second Monitoring site. The areas around these roads had been affected by extensive grass fires. Smoke from a fire towards the LOC was visible from the road to the east of Novruzlu. The Team crossed the bridge over the dry river bed on the road from Koysarly. Novruzlu and Yusifjanly had been affected by extensive grass fires. From the second Monitoring site, the Team returned to Stepanakert/Khankendi by the same route.

Team 2 (Azerbaijani side)

From Barda, the Team travelled south-west to Gindarkh and Guzanli and onward to Mekhrizli. Passing the village of Mekhrizli, the Team drove 4 km towards the first Monitoring site. In the vicinity of the village the Team could see small fields of stubble burned after the grain harvest. Approximately 300 metres east of the Monitoring site areas of burnt grass were clearly visible. Large areas of burnt grass towards the LOC and beyond were seen in the course of the Monitoring. Local commanders informed the Team that the fires had started at the beginning of June and lasted until approximately 23 June.

From this site, the Team returned via the same route and after 2 km turned south, reaching the second Monitoring site 5 km further south. The grass in some areas at the Monitoring site and also in no-man's land had burned away. The Team observed smoke from the vicinity of Novruzlu and beyond.

Day 2

The Monitoring on Day 2 covered the areas close to the LOC from a point north-east of the village of Marzili running south-east to the village of Kurapatkino.

At the third Monitoring site, immediately after visual contact was established between the Teams, a shot was registered by the Team on the Azerbaijani side. The Monitoring was immediately halted and the Teams returned to the vehicles and left the area.

Team 1 (NK side)

The Team left Stepanakert/Khankendi, travelling through Agdam, and headed south-east towards Martuni/Khojavend. Approximately 16 km north-west of Martuni/Khojavend, the Team headed north-east towards Marzili, the first Monitoring site. On the approach to Marzili and in the town itself, there had been extensive grass fires. The areas to the south of the road were mainly unaffected.

From the first Monitoring site, the Team travelled on a track beginning 1 km east of Marzili, heading south-east to the second Monitoring site 5 km north of Kurapatkino. This track ran 2-3 km parallel to the LOC. From the second Monitoring site, the Team continued south-east towards Kurapatkino. Along the length of the whole road from the first Monitoring site to the third, there were very few areas affected by fire. From the NK positions at the third Monitoring

site on the outskirts of Kurapatkino, relatively extensive areas of burnt grass were visible close to the Azerbaijani front line positions.

From the third Monitoring site, the Team travelled past Kurapatkino, taking the road south-west to Martuni/Khojavend, then north-west to Agdam, returning to Stepanakert/Khankendi. The areas visible from the road between Martuni/Khojavend and Agdam were mainly unaffected.

Team 2 (Azerbaijani side)

From Barda, the Team travelled south-east to Agjabedi, then headed to the first Monitoring site via the village of Minekhorlu. Approximately 18 km west of Minekhorlu and 500 metres before reaching the Monitoring site, an area of burnt grass was visible from the road. From the Monitoring site the Team observed large areas of burnt grass along the LOC on both sides, and in no-man's land.

From the first Monitoring site, the Team travelled approximately 10 km to the south-east, 2-3 km parallel to the LOC to the second Monitoring site. The area along this route had not been affected by fire, although from the Observation site the Team observed large areas of burnt grass, mainly on the NK side, but also in some parts on the Azerbaijani side, especially to the south.

From this site, the Team drove parallel to the LOC 6 km to the south-east, towards the village of Kurapatkino, and the third Monitoring site, passing an area approximately 2 km from the LOC where, in parts, there were areas of burnt grass. The Team left the area via the village of Regibar, back to Agjabedi and onward via the same route.

Day 3

Despite the fact that a Monitoring did not take place on Day 3 because of the shooting incident the previous day, the Teams were able to cover the area of the LOC from Kurapatkino south-east to north-east of the village of Ashagi Veysalli.

Team 1 (NK side)

From Martuni/Khojavend, the Team travelled south-east towards Ashagi-Veysalli, stopping approximately 2 km north-west of the village. The Team then drove north-west, parallel to the LOC, to the village of Kurapatkino, taking advantage of the high ground and secure location, to view the surrounding area. From its high position, the Team could observe vast areas affected by fire beyond the LOC. Several areas of burnt grass were visible along the route, including approximately 6 km north-west of Ashagi-Veysalli and in patches along the LOC.

Team 2 (Azerbaijani side)

From Agjabedi, the Team travelled to Beylagan, then continued west for approximately 30 km and stopped 4 km from the LOC, approximately 6 km north-east of Ashagi Veysalli. Travelling from this point, 4-5 km parallel to the LOC, north-west along the valley towards Kurapatkino, the Team could observe large areas of burnt grass.

Information as stated by the Parties

The local commanders on the NK side stated that servicemen and civilians were doing their best to put out the fires. They complained that crops and cattle were at risk from the fires, as well as soldiers serving in the trenches. According to them it made no sense for the NK side to start fires

so close to the front lines, for safety reasons. The fires could destroy mines which were there as defensive measures and which were difficult, dangerous and costly to replace. Local commanders alleged that the Azerbaijani side had used tracer rounds to set fire to grass and crops behind the NK positions. They added that in such hot weather, fires could also be started incidentally by discarded cigarettes or glass. It was acknowledged that fires occur every year.

The local commanders on the Azerbaijani side claimed that the NK side were shooting tracer rounds and incendiary ammunition into the positions close to and behind the Azerbaijani front line positions to start fires. They also alleged that the NK side took advantage of the wind direction to start fires at the LOC, which would be spread by the wind to the Azerbaijani areas behind the LOC. They claimed that this was done to make life difficult for the civilian population and servicemen in the trenches. Local commanders and local authorities further alleged that the NK side were deliberately setting fire to former Azerbaijani villages in the occupied territories to destroy whatever remains there. On several occasions, local authorities acknowledged that fires occur every year.

Summary of Findings

The photographs provided by the Azerbaijani side reflect a reasonably accurate picture of the geographical coverage of the fires. There was no major discrepancy between what was depicted in the photographs and what the Teams were able to view on the ground considering the lapse of time since the photographs were taken.

As acknowledged by the parties, fires are a usual phenomenon in this region at this time of year, although the intense heat which began in early June 2006 does not normally appear until July. Because of the heat and strong winds in the area, the spread of the fires was significantly greater than in recent years. Complaints related to fires have been presented to the Office on occasion during previous Monitorings – see Monitoring Reports 67, 142 and 147. Monitoring Report 80 states that measures had been taken by both parties to prevent the spread of fires.

In the affected areas, including ruined former villages on the NK side close to the LOC and the outskirts of Agdam, the fires had clearly burned away the short dry grass and had reached only the lower parts of the scarce bushes (mainly pomegranate) and some trees. As stated in the report of the 'OSCE Fact-Finding Mission to the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh', the villages in this area are 'in complete ruins' and 'appear to be totally destroyed'. What still remains was not visibly damaged as a result of fire. These areas were completely uninhabited. On the Azerbaijani side, the areas close to the LOC viewed by Team 2 were also uninhabited.

The roads and firebreaks cut into the grass had acted as barriers to prevent the fires spreading, clearly demonstrated by the satellite imagery. The photographs also show that the fires had affected the NK side of the LOC in the northern areas, east and south-east of Agdam, whereas land on the Azerbaijani side of the LOC in this area was only marginally affected. Conversely, in the more southern areas, to the east and north-east of Martuni/Khojavend, the photographs show that the land on the Azerbaijani side of the LOC had been more affected, with minimal damage on the NK side of the LOC. This is reinforced by what the Teams saw on the ground.

Areas of burnt grass were visible to the Teams on both sides of the LOC. To the rear of these areas much of the land is cultivated and, in parts, the fires had burnt out naturally or were extinguished before reaching them.

Conclusions

Although every attempt was made to cover as much ground as possible, it is regretful that for security reasons following the shooting incident, the Team was not able to get full access to all areas close to the LOC. A separate report on the shooting incident will be sent to the CiO.

It is clear that there is a lack of proper fire-fighting equipment on both sides and in some places the sources of water were not sufficiently close. International assistance for this would be helpful.

The Teams were able to collect the facts as they saw them and information as stated by the parties. However, as no experts were present, due to the urgent nature of the request, it was not possible to present a broader assessment.

Additional information is attached to this report for possible further evaluation.

Attachments*

I. Atlas of Space Images, Zones of Fire provided by the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan.
II. Video documenting areas viewed by the Team on the NK side. (The Team on the Azerbaijan side was not authorised to take video.)
III. Meteorological data provided by the authorities in NK.
IV. Data on losses in crops provided by the authorities in NK.
V. Meteorological data provided by the Azerbaijani side. ??
VI. U.S. Meteorological data for the region. ??

* Not provided with OSCE report.